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Nava,kammika Sutta

The Nava,kammika Discourse | S 7.17 [Ee S 7.2.7]

Theme: The Buddha's work is all done

Translated by Piya Tan ©2017

1 Sutta significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

The **Nava,kammika Sutta** (S 7.17) is a short discourse on the difference between worldly work and spiritual or Dharma work. While worldly work supports us and binds us to the world, spiritual work liberates us from the world, freeing us from all burden, including work (as a burden or as employment). The Buddha has attained this work-free state: his work, so to speak, is done. He has worked to free himself from all suffering and rebirth, and has attained nirvana. [§7]

1.2 RELATED SUTTAS

1.2.1 Aratī Sutta

The word **nibbanatha** recurs in **the Aratī Sutta** (S 8.2) along with the rare word *anata*, thus:

*Aratiñ ca ratiñ ca pahāya
sabbaso gehasitañ ca vitakkam
vanatham na kareyya kuhiñci
nibbanatho **anato** ca hi bhikkhu*

Having abandoned discontent and delight,
and all household-related thoughts,
let one not have any lust towards anything.
The lust-free and **bent-free**—he is indeed a monk.
(S 8.2/1:186,26*), SD 92.6

Here, the theme is that the renunciant's mind is free from "all household-related thoughts" [S 8.2c]. The arhat, having overcome both like and dislike [S 8.2a], does not lust after anything. He "**out of the wood (of lust)**" (*nibbanatha*),¹ that is, he is "lust-free," and, since he has no inclination to neither like nor dislike, he is also "**bent-free**" (*anata*) [S 8.2d]. Notice the simplicity of the language of early Buddhism.

1.2.2 Vaṅgīsa's verse

Tha 1214 of the Vaṅgīsa Thera, gāthā is practically identical to **the S 8.2 verse** [1.2.1], except for the last line (which follows the Ce and Se reading), thus:

*Aratiñ ratiñ ca pahāya
sabbaso gehasitañ ca vitakkam
vanatham na kareyya kuhiñci
nibbanatho² anato sa hi bhikkhu³*

Having abandoned discontent and delight,
and all household-related thoughts,
let one not have any lust towards anything.
The one out of the wood, bent-free—he is a monk. (Tha 1214)

An explanation of this verse is found elsewhere.⁴

¹ Further on *nibbanatha*, see SD 50.2 (1.1.4.3).

² So Ee Se; Be Ce *nibbanathā*.

³ Be Ee *avanatho sa bhikkhu*; Ce Se *anato sa hi bhikkhu*.

⁴ See SD 50.2 (1.1.5).

2 Nava,kammika Bhāra,dvāja

2.1 The interlocutor of the Sutta is simply called “**Nava,kammika**,” a brahmin of the Bhāra,dvāja clan. We have no information whether he is related to the other individuals named Bhāra,dvāja who have gone for refuge or become arhats.⁵ Nor, do we know his real name.

The word, *nava,kammika* literally means “one who does new work, a renovator.” It is merely an epithet reflecting his occupation. Hence, we only know him as “Bhāra,dvāja the renovator.”

2.2 The Commentary explains that this brahmin of the Bhāradvāja clan has forest-trees cut, and uses the timber to make gables, roof-terraces and so on. He carries these to town and sells them (SA 1:264). Clearly, he is a *vaḍḍhaki*, a broad term for an “artisan, carpenter, mason.” From the Sutta, we can deduce that he is clearly a carpenter, since he works with timber. Hence, we can alternatively call him “Bhāra,dvāja the carpenter.”

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The Nava,kammika Discourse

S 7.17

Nava,kammika Bhāra,dvāja meets the Buddha

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in a certain thick wood in Kosala.

2 Now, at that time, the brahmin Nava,kammika Bhāra,dvāja (the renovator) was getting some work done in that same thick wood.

3 Then, the brahmin Nava,kammika Bhāra,dvāja saw the Blessed One under a certain sal tree, sitting cross-legged, keeping his body upright, with mindfulness established before him.

4 Seeing (the Blessed One), it occurred to him:

“Now, I delight in this thick wood getting work done. What does this recluse Gotama delight in getting done?”⁶

The brahmin questions the Buddha

5 Then, the brahmin Nava,kammika Bhāra,dvāja approached the Blessed One, and uttered this verse:

6 *Ke nu kammantā karīyanti
bhikkhu sāla,vane tava
yad’ekako araññasmim
ratim vindati gotamāti⁷*

With what work are you occupied,
bhikshu, in this sal forest,
that you find delight, Gotama,
all alone in the forest? d
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⁵ See SD 22.2; SD 50.10 (2).

⁶ *Ahaṃ kho imasmim vana,saṅḍe kammantaṃ kārapento ramāmi. Ayaṃ samaṇo gotamo kiṃ kārapento rama-tīti?* Note that the brahmin addresses the Buddha by name, which means that he knows the Buddha, or that he Buddha is familiar to him.

⁷ Ce; Be Ee Se *gotamo’ti*.

[The Blessed One:]

7 *Na me vanasmim̃ karaṇīyam atthi
ucchinna,mūlam̃ me vanam̃ visūkam̃
svāham̃ vane nibbanatho visallo
eko rame aratim̃ vippahāyāti*

There is for me nothing to be done in the forest.
Cut down at the root, my wood is dried up.
I'm one out of the wood,⁸ dart removed: in the forest
alone I delight, having abandoned discontent.

8 When this was said, the brahmin Nava,kammika Bhāra,dvāja said this to the Blessed One:

“Excellent, master Gotama! Excellent, master Gotama! Just as if one

were to place upright what had been overturned,

were to reveal what was hidden,

were to show the way to one who was lost, or

were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms,

in the same way, in numerous ways, has the Dharma been made known by master Gotama.

I go to master Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May master Gotama remember me as lay followers who has gone for refuge, from this day forth, for life.”

— evam̃ —

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⁸ “Out of the wood” (*nibbanatha*): a wordplay on *vana*, “forest, wood.” ***Nibbanatha*** (*ni*, “out” + *vanatha*, “the wood(s)”) literally, “without forest, wood-free” (KhpA 151,26; J 3:358), idiomatically, “out of the wood(s),” meaning, “without craving” (*nikkāmo nibbano*, Sn 1131; *nibbanā*, plural, Dh 283); free from the “forest of defilements” (*nikkilesa,vano*) (SA 1:260). Here, “forest” is a metaphor for craving or sensual desire. ***Nibbana*** (*ni*, “out (of)” + *vana*, “forest”) is often taken as a variant reading for *nibbāna*.⁸ See SD 50.2 (1.1.4.3+1.1.5.3). See (1.2.1) above.